Marcus Fingerlin Interview

This interview took place on September 27th, 2025, at Pirate Contemporary Art in Lakewood, Colorado, at Fingerlin's solo show 'It's Hard to Give a Shit These Days.'

Marcus Fingerlin is a contemporary painter and sculptor whose subversive works critique Americana through the language and logic of cartoons. Irreverent humor and effusive absurdity drip from his contemporary religious paintings, which hold deeper undertones while demonstrating formal rigor. We share community through Pirate Contemporary Art, the oldest artist co-op in Denver, where we both belong. In support of my research into cartoons and existential terror in the Anthropocene, Fingerlin argued convincingly for a deep link between humor and death, connecting fear of death to an underlying anxiety shaped by capitalist pressures and American-inflected Christian values. He made a connection between maniacal consumption of pop culture—especially television and cartoons—and a fear of extinction, noting how characters like Homer Simpson achieve a kind of permanent existence. In contrast, his own cartoony paintings, with their "irreverent realism," become reminders of the mortality he cannot escape. He also offered a reading of the desert as a space symbolizing release from the state's attempts to control nature, and therefore as an imagined site of freedom from the capitalist mirage of a "comfortable life."

Before I began recording, Marcus and I had a brief exchange in which I mentioned that his work felt influenced by Philip Guston and Dana Schutz. We quickly discovered that we share a favorite painting at the Denver Art Museum—Guston's Caught (1970)—and that, as kids, we both initially disliked yet were strangely captivated by it. Over time, the painting grew on each of us, a coincidence

we found striking. We also talked about seeing Dana Schutz's breakout show at the DAM in 2005, appreciating the conceptual and formal strength of her work, and discussing the later controversy around her Emmett Till painting. Our off-record conversation ended with a short reflection on his choice to paint in a deliberately flat manner.

JJ: Just to start with a little context, can you just tell me a little bit about your practice generally, and how you would describe the kind of work that you do?

MF: Kim Faber (*a Denver visual artist*) recently told me that I was a contemporary religious painter. I think that's a pretty appropriate way of describing what I'm doing. That has a relationship to my childhood and how I grew up, and how I was raised. You kind of already hit the nail on the head, that there's this kind of figurative lineage in contemporary art that I see myself falling into - the Philip Guston, Dana Schutz, Nicole Eisenman, Kerry James Marshall lineage of painting. And then there's also this underground relationship I have with, R. Crumb comics and those early, strange, 60s psychedelic comic books. Somebody asked me where I got my ideas from, and I said that I got them from God and *Itchy and Scratchy*. That's really the conceptualization. But those flat colors always have come from the cartoon side of things. I have an Oedipus complex with television. I love to hate television. I don't watch TV anymore. I cut TV completely out of my life because it's just like obsessive. If I had unlimited time on this planet, I think all I would do is watch television. I would sit in front of the TV and just watch every single minute of television I could. Before I quit TV, I watched the Simpsons seven times. There's thirty seasons, and I watched it seven times in my life. And I started thinking about, 'Wow, you are wasting your time, big time.' And I'm not even one of those people

who can memorize quotes. I couldn't even quote you one thing from The Simpsons. I was just completely shutting down my brain and watching television.

JJ: Was it a comfort thing?

MF: Absolutely.

JJ: Just a state of being.

MF: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was almost like meditation. Your brain goes into a different state, and you're not even on this planet. You're just wasting seven hours, sitting there. I think meditation is probably more helpful.

JJ: You had said you see each individual work as a joke that is part of the collective sitcom, that in sum creates an irreverent realism. For you, what's the irreverence? What is the thing or the person or the concept that you are subverting or responding to or against?

MF: I think you are onto something there. For this show in particular, it was America and Christian values of America. Pretty much across-the-board, that’s what I'm responding to, is American values. We're all ridiculously irreverent all the time. I mean, the President's on the news saying ‘fuck’. (in response to what he was saying, I pointed to his largescale oil painting *Us V. Them (Over and Over Again*

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MF: Yes, exactly!

JJ: If someone said, go over with a highlighter and highlight two key words in Marcus's artist statement, I'd highlight *American* and *violence*.

MF: Yes! For sure.

JJ: And I see in your work art historical references. What is your interest there?

MF: Just me ripping people off. To add to a conversation, I think you have to rip it off a *little* bit. You have to reference what's happened before. I ripped off Renaissance artists. Caravaggio is a big inspiration in the show. That's where the violence comes in. Caravaggio was a murderer and a drunk, but he's also painting the Bible the way it was, these violent actions. The honesty of looking at that book in that way was super attractive to me. And then there's this other artist in *popular* culture, Quentin Tarantino, who I think, kind of continues that lineage. Those two figures really were the lineage to this show specifically.

JJ: Your work is playful and I see fear in the paintings. For you, is humor a way to digest the undigestible?

MF: I think you're onto something. Joseph Campbell was this religious guy, but also very critical. He references 'peekaboo' in one of his books, and how peekaboo is the first joke we hear. But peekaboo is really about death. You're a kid and your parent is pretending that they're gone, they're dead, and they're off this planet. And as the child reacts, it begins to react with fear. And then the parent takes its hands back, and they're still there, and the child reacts with laughter. And I think comedy and humor have that infused in it, at its base level. It's the deepest, darkest thing about humanity. It's death. And I don't think the two can be separated from each other, death and humor. We all know we're gonna die. But we have unique ways of dealing with that knowledge. We build skyscrapers. We build Mount Rushmore. We're attempting to leave something significant behind, and humor is sort of saying, "why would you do that? That's stupid."

JJ: Joke's on you.

MF: No matter what you do. No matter how you spin it, no matter how high up on the chain of command you end up, you're still gonna die. And comedy is a great

reminder of that; it’s the basest and original form. It’s about, ‘oh, remember your mortality.’

JJ: You did two residencies at Ghost Ranch. I'm curious whether a New Mexico landscape, or a Colorado landscape, or a cartoon landscape intersects with your work or mean anything to you.

MF: You have to have these figures in space. I end up in a lot of these desertscapes, too. And the desert is also very significant in the Bible. Thinking about the relationship of place in that way is very interesting to me. Being at Ghost Ranch changed the trajectory of my life and still informs my practice. It was the first time that I really met a group of people who I related to. They opened my eyes. They helped me become who I was. Biblical landscape, Moses out in the desert, leading his people for forty years, then the New Testament, Jesus in the desert, being tempted by the devil, and then me in the desert in New Mexico. I'm not trying to make a correlation between myself and Christ, but that's how it felt. It felt so significant to be out in this this desertscape and learning who I was, changing who I was, growing up, essentially.

JJ: Are you kind of thinking of those notions in *‘God Kicks the Shit Out of a Dude (Jacob V. the LORD)’*

MF: Certainly, Jesus in the desert, yes. This guy was clearly already suffering before he was attacked. He was wandering. He had no space to be. No place to be. And that's the other thing about the desert, it feels so welcoming to me. I feel so at home there.

JJ: I do too.

MF: Which is incredible, like, but *why*? Because it's barren. There's no water, shade, food, there's, there's a million things that are trying to kill you; rattlesnakes, scorpions. We found a scorpion in the sink of my bathroom within the first couple of days I was there.

JJ: I lived in Tucson as a little kid, running around barefoot in the desert. There's something about it.

MF: Maybe it's the relationship to the comfort. You're sitting with death in a lot of those places. And that probably is where the relationship to my exhibition is too.

JJ: Maybe it takes an anxiety away when you're just facing reality. When we hide from things, they fester in our subconscious.

MF: Oh my god. I think you just fixed me! I think you just did what a therapist couldn't do. I think you're one hundred percent right. That's where so much of my anxiety comes from, with capitalism and living in these systems, right? We're lying to other people. We're lying to society, where we're creating something that is trying to ensnarl nature, which is naturally chaotic. And put lines where there aren't lines, and jail cells where there aren't jail cells. And so in the desert, it's right there, man.

JJ: So, I'm curious: 'dumb and wild and free;' a Mountain Goat song.

MF: Yeah, that's good! I think you're the only one who's caught that reference.

JJ: It makes sense with everything we're talking about but how does it describe either you personally or your worldview?

MF: That song is *Deuteronomy 2:10*, and he's talking about the extinction of different species around the world. That near extinction concept I've played with for so long—the near extinction of humanity—I feel like it's possible and probable that it's happening soon. But *that* specific lyric, I have always identified with. I feel dumb and wild and free. I also *want* to be that, first of all. I have a very hard time fitting into a system. I would prefer to exist and enjoy my time and see beautiful things. I don't want to rule or be ruled. I don't want to be part of the ruling class. It's really where I've kind of become a duality in myself. Because I have to do it in order to pay the rent but I desperately want to be out in that desert.

JJ: I hear you. Last question: the cartoony sensibility – are you looking more at the visual aesthetic? Or is it the cartoon logic that interests you?

MF: It's both, for sure, for sure. Homer Simpson can get the shit beat out of him in one scene but then he's at the football game in the next scene and he's completely fine. Its so impermanent. It doesn't last ten seconds. But it's also much more permanent because anything Homer Simpson does is going to outlast whatever the hell I'm doing here.